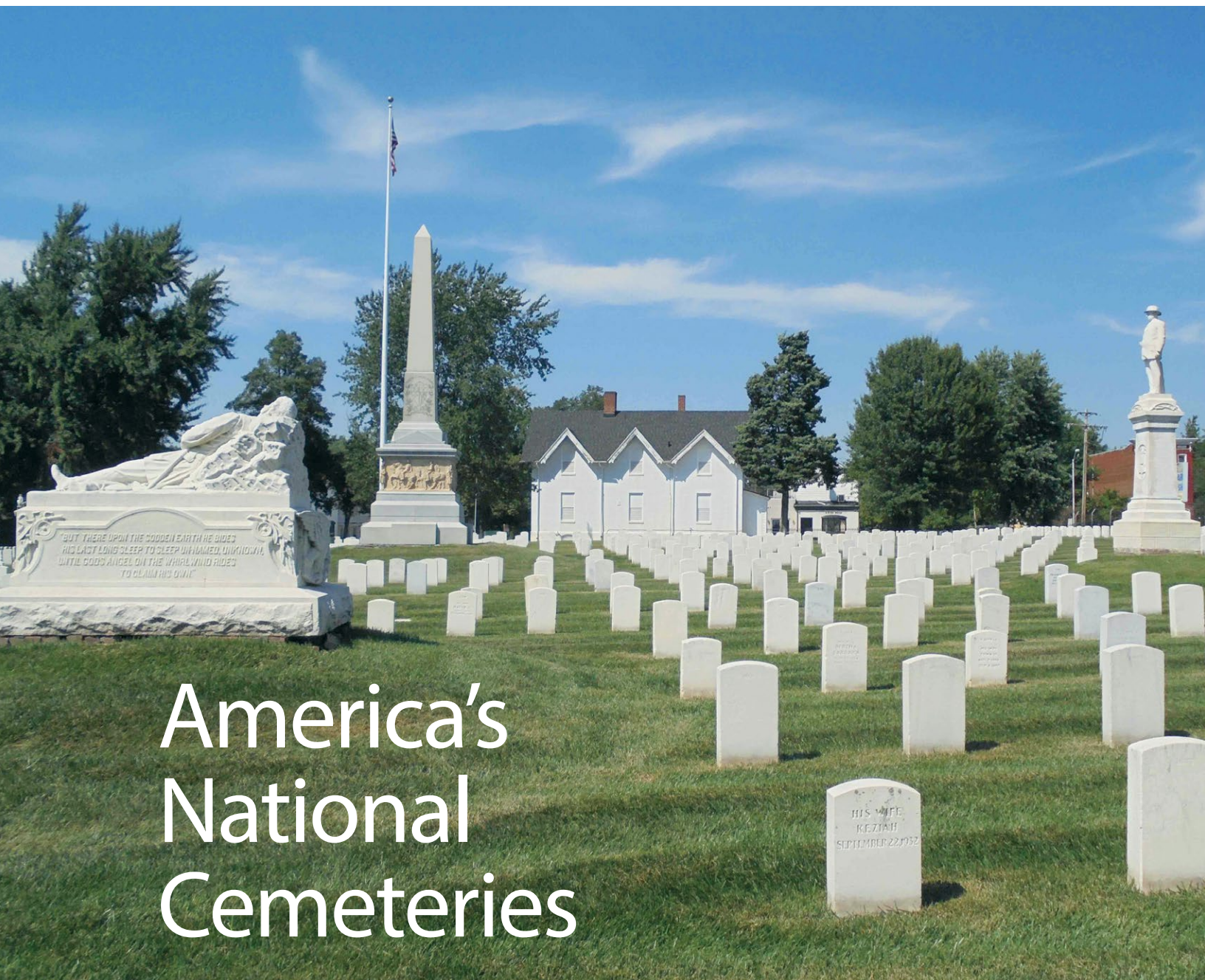




National Cemetery Administration Veterans Legacy Program



America's National Cemeteries

A Resource Guide for College Instructors

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

www.cem.va.gov/legacy

*“They say, We leave you our deaths: give them their meaning...” **

Since the Civil War, the United States has maintained national cemeteries to honor its veterans’ service. A century and a half later, these cemeteries offer a broad range of resources for study and opportunities to honor those who have served in the nation’s wars. Within their walls and records may be found the story of how the nation has met its debt to those who served in its armed forces and how our understanding of that obligation has deepened with time.



Each national cemetery has its own history and unique landscape, with geography, design, and nature worthy of reflection. The cemeteries’ manicured lawns reflect the care extended to sacred ground where honored dead lie. The mission of the Veterans Legacy Program is to extend that care beyond the grave to remember veterans’ service to the nation by telling their stories. The program draws on the help of educators and students to search out the sources to document these lives and honor their deeds. Accounts of courage and sacrifice, and of competence and service, contribute to our appreciation of what earlier generations have given to the nation and help us understand why this ground is set aside as hallowed.

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Cover Photo: Loudon Park National Cemetery, Baltimore, MD

Archival material from National Cemetery Administration, Historians Office: page 6 (top, postcard), page 8 (map)

All contemporary photographs are by Thomas G. Connors.

**Excerpt from Archibald MacLeish’s poem, “The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak”
(Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24204400>)*

Historical Background

Until the mid-nineteenth century, soldiers who died in wartime were buried in mass or ad hoc graves near the battlefield or encampment. Changes in attitudes towards death and burial in the Victorian era coincided in the United States with the deadliest event in its history, the Civil War. From the effort to provide fallen servicemen with individually marked graves (even if unknown) arose the earliest national cemeteries. In the paragraph that follows, an example of each type of national cemetery is given in parentheses.

Some national cemeteries were on battlefields (for example, Cold Harbor). Others were near hospitals (Keokuk) or prisons (Woodlawn). It is worth remembering that Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address at the dedication of the military cemetery there. Burial grounds at frontier military posts (Fort Leavenworth) also became national cemeteries during this period. Some of them (Barrancas) had graves dating back decades before the Civil War. By the early twentieth century, most new cemeteries were at veterans' homes or hospitals (Los Angeles) and, in particular, the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (Dayton, Ohio). These cemeteries have many common features, such as superintendent's lodges and ceremonial rostrums.

The World Wars and Cold War added new generations of veterans and an expectation that any veteran who so desired should be accommodated in a national cemetery within a reasonable distance from home. The original nineteenth-century cemeteries tended to be too small and crowded or too far away from new veteran populations, leading to the development of larger new cemeteries to satisfy demand (Long Island). In 1973, Congress placed most of the national cemeteries under the Veterans Administration, which is now the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This left the Army with two national cemeteries (Arlington and Soldiers' Home). It also left the National Park Service with most of the battlefield cemeteries (including Gettysburg), while the American Battle Monuments Commission continued to maintain America's overseas cemeteries (Normandy). Since then, the VA's National Cemetery Administration has opened large new facilities near underserved population areas (South Florida), and its national cemeteries now number more than 130. Newer cemeteries have committal shelters and administration buildings instead of rostrums and lodges. They also have columbarium walls, in recognition of the growing popularity of cremation.

In addition to these cemeteries, the National Cemetery Administration also has responsibility for 33 smaller properties, such as Civil War soldiers' lots in larger cemeteries (Baxter Springs, for example) and old post burial grounds (such as Fort Mackinac). Perhaps the most interesting of these are the cemeteries associated with Union prisons (Camp Chase, for example) or the government lots in Congressional Cemetery in Washington, DC.



Culpepper, VA

Reading a National Cemetery's Landscape

One of the characteristic features of a national cemetery is its orderly appearance, with regimented graves lined up as if in formation. The design of nineteenth-century military cemeteries often used a geometric grid, circle, or half-wheel, sometimes centered around a flagpole mound. At other early cemeteries, the roads wind along hillsides, with sections shaped by the terrain. Later national cemeteries show the influence of the memorial park movement, with expansive lawns broken by gently curving roads, all constructed on a very large scale. Many national cemeteries have developed over time, incorporating a mix of periods and styles. Rows of new markers among old ones, or a brick wall between sections, may be evidence of a former road or a new addition.

Government-issued grave markers tell their own story, since the information they offer expands over time. What began with just a name and a military unit now includes awards, dates, and epitaphs (see <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/history/hmhst.asp> for the evolution of these markers). There are currently more than 50 emblems of belief that can be selected. Today's traditional military headstone is available in granite as well as marble. Other options range from flat markers in bronze or granite to smaller markers designed for columbarium niches or memorial walls. In national cemeteries, memorial sections or walls are set aside to remember servicemen and servicewomen who have no resting place, such as those who were missing in action, lost at sea, or had ashes scattered. Those are indicated by the phrase "In Memory of" on the individual marker. Some private headstones have been allowed in national cemeteries, particularly in earlier years, and they stand out as unique among the lines of government markers.

Often the most prominent features in a national cemetery are its monuments. These may commemorate a war, battle, unit, or individual. They range from hand-carved folk memorials to bronze soldiers and tall obelisks. Monuments from the Civil War coincide with a golden age of sculpture and monument-building. Many of those from more recent decades tend toward simple granite blocks or carillons (with notable exceptions in Riverside and Sarasota). In a special class are the iron tablets displaying patriotic classics, such as the Gettysburg Address, Bivouac of the Dead, or Logan's Memorial Day Order. Victorian ironwork can sometimes be found in cemetery gates or fences. Many early cemeteries display vintage plaques with information about the cemetery's burials. These were often mounted on Civil War cannons.

Each national cemetery has its own history and set of features. Architectural style tends towards the conservative, with some variation over time. Early cemeteries usually contain lodges, and they often have the iconic Second Empire mansard-roofed dwellings designed around 1870. Colonial styles came into favor before the Depression. Rostrums can incorporate Victorian ironwork, Classical columns, or Mediterranean tiles. The twentieth century's administration buildings, gates, and columbaria range from mid-century Neoclassical to Modern in style. The use of Spanish Colonial design in the Southwest is a notable regional variation.



Danville, IL

Developing a Tour of a National Cemetery

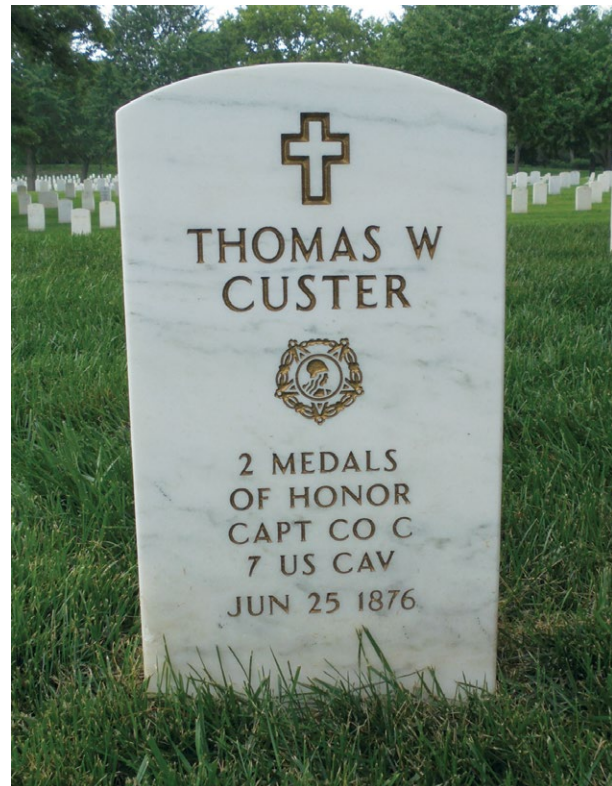
There are many ways to view or approach the study of a national cemetery. Each cemetery has a unique history but also fits some general patterns. The most obvious focus of study would be on the history of the cemetery itself or the lives of those commemorated there. Another approach would be through architecture and design, the style of the structures, or the layout of the grounds. A more scientific emphasis might focus on the landscape, its flora, and its wildlife, and investigate what life is supported among the manicured lawns. The geography itself may be of interest; consider, for example, the volcanic crater of Honolulu's National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, the steep peninsula of Fort Rosecrans, and the Mississippi bluffs of Jefferson Barracks. Each cemetery offers a variety of resources for examining many subjects, provided the study respects the dignity of those buried there.

General History: Questions to Explore

- What are the origins of the cemetery? When and why was it located here?
- How is the cemetery designed? What is the site's geography?
- From what eras are the cemetery's burials? Where are its earliest burials?
- How are the cemetery's sections organized? In older cemeteries, for example, they may be arranged by state or by period. In newer cemeteries, they may relate to type of burial (full, cremains, or memorial) or be arranged chronologically as sections fill up and new sections are opened.
- What are the main landmarks and features of the cemeteries? These may include monuments, buildings, gates, or flagpoles, with designs and materials reflecting their eras, like Victorian ironwork or Art Deco reliefs from the New Deal.

Biography

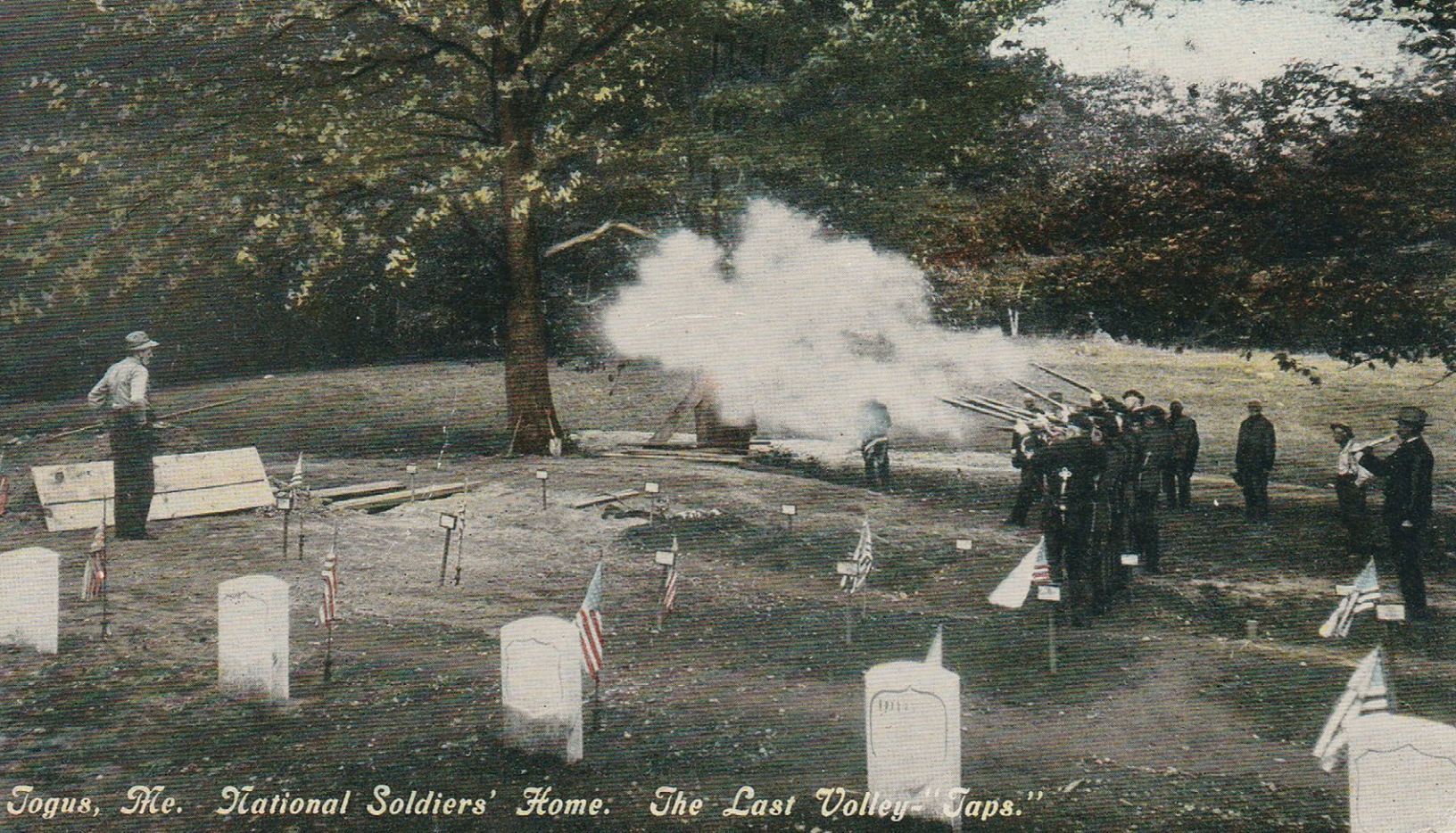
While Internet resources make it far easier than ever before to research the lives of people interred in the national cemeteries, finding enough information to make for a good story can still be a challenge. It may be best to identify subjects who have some claim to fame (a war hero, congressman, etc.) or have a descendant who makes information widely available online (on www.ancestry.com or www.findagrave.com, for example). Each national cemetery's official Web page provides a list of notable persons buried there, focusing on Medal of Honor recipients and military figures. Some of these figures may even be enemy POWs. Wikipedia and www.findagrave.com also list a cemetery's notables, including those with entertainment or cultural achievements outside the military and political spheres. Connections to larger topics can be made through bare factual information: For example, knowing that someone was in a particular regiment between two particular dates makes it likely they experienced the same battles and encampments that the regiment did during that period. Finding that an individual survived Andersonville or the sinking of the *Indianapolis* provides a connection to a significant historical event. Others may have served in an interesting unit, as Buffalo Soldiers or Code Talkers, for example, and some may represent ethnic or gender diversity. Group burials generally have a story behind them—often a battle, disaster, or archaeological discovery. Newspapers, obituaries, and oral histories are good resources for learning about veterans' lives. All veterans have lives worth remembering.



Ft. Leavenworth, KS

Public History Projects and Service Learning Activities

The national cemeteries welcome the engagement of colleges and universities through public history projects and volunteer work. An instructor or class wishing to undertake such projects should work closely with cemetery staff to plan, identify, develop, and complete the project. Any project that takes place at a national cemetery property or represents a national cemetery in a public forum (in news media or online, for example) should be planned with the approval and participation of the cemetery's office.



Togus, ME (postcard)

Samples of Public History Projects

Each national cemetery has its own historical resources and research needs, which vary widely. The following are some samples of possible public history projects.

- Researching a cemetery's history, features, and the service of veterans buried there.
- Designing guides for visitors to the cemetery, and interpreting its landscape and history.
- Working with staff to plan educational or commemorative events at the cemetery.
- Creating informational websites or apps with information about the cemetery.
- Mapping the cemetery's development and sections.
- Exploring resources related to particular periods or themes, such as the Civil War; the New Deal; or race, ethnicity, and gender.
- Developing educational programs about the cemetery for local schools and groups. These might range from tours to educational activities or traveling trunks.
- Starting an oral history archive about the cemetery's history and traditions, and interviewing veterans who volunteer there or plan to be buried there.
- Researching traditions at the national cemeteries, such as the placement of flags and wreaths on graves, or annual Veterans Day programs. For example, Memorial Day in Beaufort and Natchez was an important community event for African Americans as far back as Reconstruction.
- Investigating the cemetery's landscape, flora and fauna, ecology, and terrain.
- Examining the cemetery's architecture and artwork, or its design and geography, and observing how those reflect particular cultural periods and tastes.

Los Angeles, CA





Resources for Studying the National Cemeteries

- American Battle Monuments Commission: <http://www.abmc.gov>
- Civil War Era National Cemeteries, National Park Service: http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/national_cemeteries/
- Congressional Medal of Honor Society website: <http://www.cmoths.org>
- "Landscapes of Honor and Sacrifice: History of the National Cemeteries," a documentary available at <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/video/LandscapesofSacrifice.aspx>
- History of Government-Furnished Headstones and Markers: <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/history/hmhistsp>
- List of national cemeteries, with links to individual cemetery home pages: <http://www.cem.va.gov/cems/allnational.asp>
- Nationwide Gravesite Locator: <http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov>
- National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Fact Sheets: <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/about/factsheets.asp>
- NCA History pages on VA website: <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/history/>
- National Cemeteries' Burial Registers can be searched on ancestry.com (fees apply), or free of charge at National Archives branches and some libraries: <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3135>
- Veterans History Project, Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/vets/>

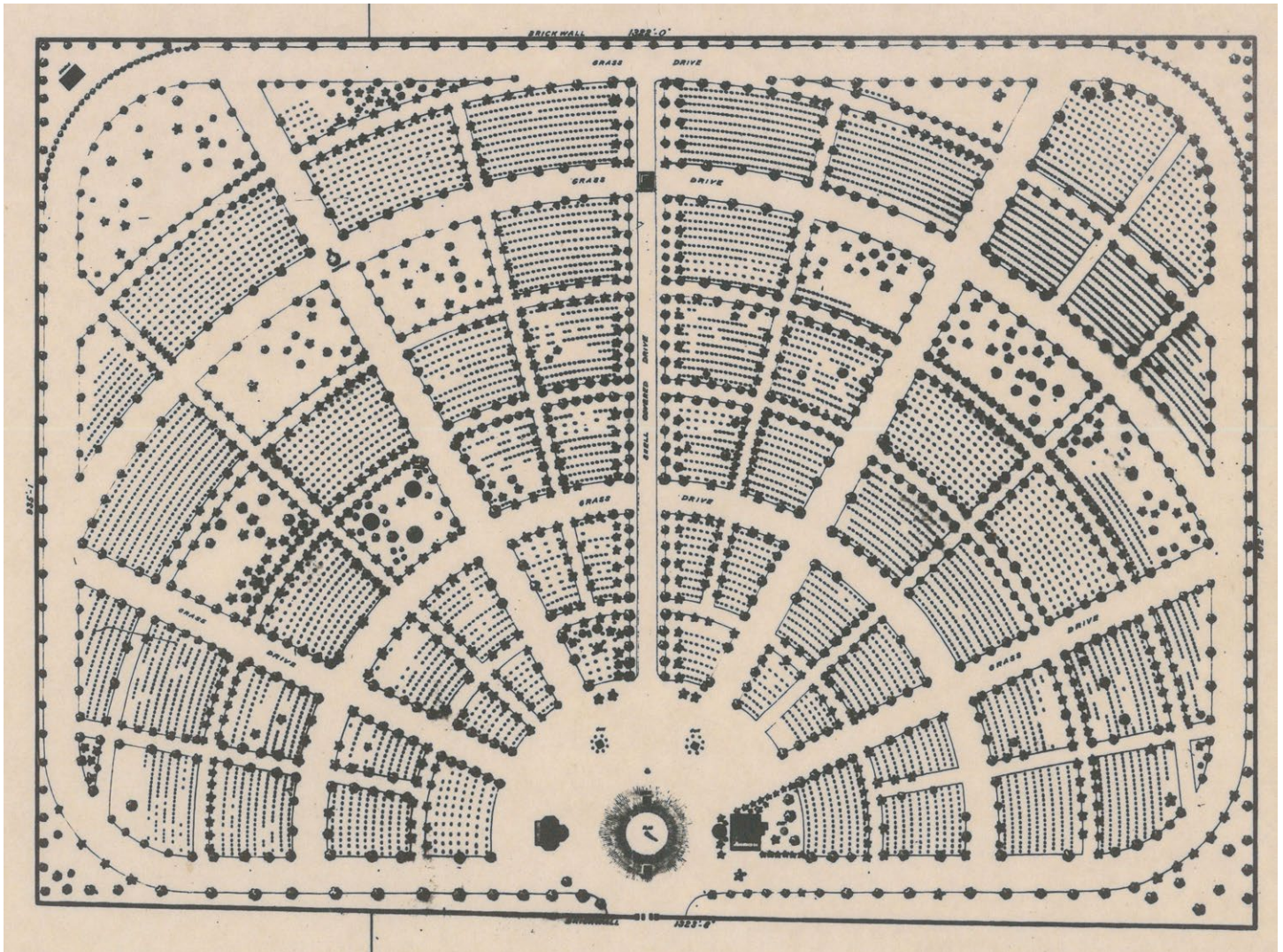
Books:

- *American Military Cemeteries*, 2nd edition. Dean Holt, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010
- *Our Hallowed Ground: World War II Veterans of Ft. Snelling*. Stephen Chicoine, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003
- *The Riverside National Cemetery Story*. Marlowe Churchill, Virginia Beach: Donning, 2010
- *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, & Honor Our Military Fallen*. Michael Sledge, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005
- *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. Drew Gilpin Faust, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008

Archival Resources:

- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) – early records in DC: Army Quartermaster General – Cemetery Files
- NARA – later records in College Park, MD: VA Department of Memorial Affairs, National Cemeteries Historical File
- Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, Historians Office, Washington, DC
- Some national cemeteries have small collections of material related to the cemetery's individual history.

Winchester, VA



Beaufort National Cemetery Site Plan, 1893



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